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How can we enhance enjoyment of secondary school?: the student view

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Abstract

This paper considers enjoyment of formal education for young people aged 14 to 16, largely from their own perspective, based on the view of around 3,000 students in England. The data includes documentary analysis, official statistics, interviews and surveys with staff and students. Enjoyment of school tends to be promoted by factors such as successful social relationships, small classes, variation in learning, and students having some control of their learning. Enjoyment tends to be inhibited by perceived lack of respect or concern by teaching staff and passive pedagogy. For some disengaged students, a work or college environment with more adult relationships appears to restore enjoyment and enthusiasm. Enjoyment, unlike attainment for example, is not particularly stratified by the standard student background variables. Nor is there evidence of a clear school effect. This means that enjoyment should be easy to enhance more widely, positively affecting the learner identities of all young people, including the more reluctant learners.

Introduction

According to reports of school inspections conducted by OFSTED, it is claimed that much teaching in England is boring, and that it fails to inspire students in thousands of schools (Marley 2009). A survey of students at both primary and secondary stages also found that around 58% reported enjoying school most of the time (OFSTED 2007), meaning that around 42% did not. It was the teaching that provided the most complaints, and the most suggestions for improvement. The most popular option to improve school (79%) was to have more fun and interesting lessons. And yet until recently the issue of young people enjoying their education has been of little sustained policy interest. School improvement has tended to focus on rather narrower indicators of school attainment. Of course, more enjoyment in education could be linked to higher levels of student engagement and so improved learning. But enjoyment is about a lot more than that. It is important in its own right; it could enhance attendance and inclusion at school, and lead to higher participation in education and training following school. It is part of creating a lifelong learner identity, welcoming and seeking out subsequent opportunities for learning (Gorard and Selwyn 2005).

The enjoyment of education by students *has* been a long-standing area of interest for some commentators and many practitioners (Barth, 1970, Stables 1990, Harris and Haydn 2006). Yet it is relatively recently in the UK that declared policy for the home countries has turned so clearly towards enjoyment of learning as a key objective. Enjoyment of learning and of attendance in formal education for young people has become a major declared aim for policy-makers and practitioners. This is so in England, where ‘Excellence and Enjoyment’ is a key theme of the primary strategy (DfES 2003), and the 14-19 Reform Programme introduced from September 2008 is intended to result in young people who enjoy learning (see Gorard et al. 2009). In Wales, the new Foundation Phase has enjoyment of learning as a major desired outcome of the reforms (Welsh Assembly Government 2009). Other governments and government funded agencies also emphasise the importance of enjoyment, for learning (e.g. LTS Scotland 2009). Of course, it is not always clear what these documents mean by enjoyment (Hartley 2005).

In this literature enjoyment is usually imagined as both an outcome itself, and as a characteristic of students who achieve well, want to participate and progress further in

education or training, and are confident and responsible citizens. It is often considered in relation to specific curriculum subjects and so omits the extra-curricular and social life of school entirely (Pell 1985, Carroll and Loumidis 2001). ~~It~~ Enjoyment is widely seen as having a potential role in the further improvement of schools and schooling. But what does this mean in practice? What do young people themselves currently say about enjoyment and schooling, who reports enjoying school, and what might be done to enhance the experience for others? These are questions that need to be answered if the policies cited above are to be implemented effectively. They are the questions we address in this paper, using an all-embracing and self-reported view of ‘enjoyment’ at school.

Method

We selected a sample of educational settings catering for 14 to 19 year-olds in England in 2007/2008. These were selected via Edubase (a public database of school and college details) combined with annual schools census pupil intake data, and the national pupil database of achievement, to represent all regions of England, the diversity of institutions and provision, and the range of size and performance. Cases were selected randomly within these categories, but the inevitable level of replacement means that the sample is not random. The case study approach was a requirement of the funder, so that each institution agreed to take part for a further five years following this baseline study, and changes in provision and attitudes could be tracked over time as the 14-19 reforms become more fully embedded.

The resultant 45 cases included community and other schools such as selective, academies and faith-based, colleges catering for pre-16 students, and pupil referral units/projects. The sample includes a minimum of four such schools in each category. There were 16 community schools, 12 Further Education colleges taking some year 11 students, five faith-based schools and Academies, four Foundation schools, four independent schools, and four other (including PRUs and special projects). We were specifically requested by the funder not to include special schools. The largest school, other than the FE colleges which catered for a much larger age range, had 1,475 pupils and the smallest had nine. Their published Key Stage 4 attainment ranged from

the highest to the lowest decile in 2006. They were geographically distributed by economic region, with 10 in London and the South East, seven in the Midlands, five each in the East of England, and in the North West, and six each in the South West, Yorkshire and Humberside, and the North East. In terms of local population density, 19 were in dense urban settings, 10 in sparser urban settings, six in smaller towns, and 10 in villages or hamlets.

For each case we gathered organisation strategic plans, achievement, retention and progression data, prospectus, policies and information on advice and guidance, staff numbers/structure, and curriculum range. We surveyed all year 11 (2,700) and year 12 (2,200) students in each centre (where available) and all full-time staff in year 11 settings. We conducted interviews with the principal, chair of governors, a parent-governor, teacher governor, local employer, representative of a partner organisation, young people disengaged from education or training, young people with learning difficulties, year 11 learners, and some of their parents. In total we conducted 798 student and 295 adult interviews. For the purposes of this paper we present only our findings related to year 11 students, and the adults dealing with them. We followed standard professional and institutional guidelines on ethics. All cases and individuals within cases took part voluntarily, and were made aware that they could withdraw at any time. All data was held separately from an encryption key, known only to the project directors, and never made available to the funders. This approach also provided cases with some defence against freedom of information requests. No case or individual is identifiable from the database handed over to the funders, and for this reason the biographical data attached to the interviews is deliberately minimal.

We assured all participants of anonymity while also being required by the funder to provide all participating institutions with full case reports. The identity of all staff and students interviewed were known to the participating institutions, who had made the arrangements and scheduled the rooms for interviews. One consequence of this, and the Freedom of Information Act, is that we could not store or use many of the characteristics of each individual that we might otherwise have wanted to without inadvertently identifying a specific individual. One institution might have only one female deputy, or only one year 11 male with Asperger's Syndrome, or only one student presented for a focus group who was also studying a specific subject at the

local college, for example. Another consequence is that we are unable to link the individual survey results to the school involved, except at an institutional level.

The analysis in this paper is based on a combined data file linking the individual responses to the survey of students, the characteristics of each institution from Edubase, ~~of~~ the school student mix and course entry patterns from NPD/PLASC, an estimate from documents of the number of curriculum areas offered, and school-level summaries (means, or percentages above a threshold level) of responses to the staff survey. To these we add the transcribed accounts of a sub-set of the students (and some adults) from an Nvivo file coded according to perspective and the themes of enjoyment, and interest, and linked to the survey data at institutional level. For more details on the sampling, methods of data collection and analysis see Gorard et al. (2009).

We focus first on two of the survey variables based on agreement by students that they ‘enjoy school’ and that ‘most lessons are interesting’, or not. These are each treated as the dependent variable, in turn, in a binary logistic regression analysis, with the other variables outlined above used as potential explanatory variables. The explanatory variables are entered in stages: first the individual student background characteristics such as sex, then the school-level characteristics such as curriculum offer and staff responses, and finally the individual student responses to other survey items. At each stage, the addition of new variables can only explain variation in the outcomes that is left unexplained by the previous stage. The stages are selected for several reasons. Perhaps most importantly, they represent a kind of biographical order from birth characteristics to current experiences at school. Placing the school-level variables before the individual ones also allows the greatest possible role for the influence of institutions on student outcomes (although each model has been run in several orders and the same substantive conclusions emerge each time). The base level for each outcome simply reflects the proportion of positive responses (50% means that 50% of students agreed for example). It is from the base level that the explanatory variables can be used to create a better explanation of student outcomes. Thus, the variation explained at each stage is:

$$(\text{Percentage predicted correctly} - (100 - \text{base})) / (100 - \text{base})$$

Any variance left unexplained (100-percentage predicted correctly) could be due to a variety of factors including model mis-specification or transcription and recording errors. The most likely causes of unexplained variance are missing variables (we can only use what we have, and this omits factors such as student motivation and individual evidence of additional needs), and the inherent unpredictability of individuals (we would not expect to explain 100% of the variation in any outcome).

At each stage, new variables are entered into the model, and then removed in backward stepwise fashion ~~using the likelihood ratio~~ according to their 'effect' size. Thus, some variables are not used in each model, as they contribute nothing to the outcome, and some variables are not used in either model. Each explanatory variable that is retained has a calculated coefficient that gives an idea of its relative importance to the model. The coefficient is like an odds for one category compared to another (so that 0.5 for sex might mean that males were only half as likely *ceteris paribus* to have the specified outcome). Alternatively, the coefficient for a real number variable is a multiplier (so that 0.9 for school-level FSM might mean that the specified outcome is only 0.9 times as likely for every percentage of the school intake eligible for free school meals). The precise figures are not key here (there are too many compromises in such a large and complex dataset, and the model is best fit *a posteriori* only), but their relative importance and the direction of their 'influence' could be an important clue to the determinants of student enjoyment at school. What does this analysis tell us?

The patterns of enjoyment

A majority of students nearing the end of their compulsory schooling do not enjoy education. In fact, only 44% of students in year 11 enjoy being at their school. And one of the reasons for this is clear. Only 38% say that most of their lessons are interesting. These figures are lower than those reported by OFSTED (2007, see above) perhaps because OFSTED included primary and early-age secondary children as well. They are also lower than the levels reported, in many countries, for enjoyment of specific school-based subjects (e.g. Caygill 2008). This is perhaps an effect of the

aggregation of such specific responses to school level. For example, if around half of the students in any school enjoyed each subject, and these were not always the same ‘half’ for every subject, then asking whether they enjoyed school or found most lessons interesting more generally would tend to lead to an aggregate score of less than half.

Table 1 shows the result of the logistic regression model using a number of possible explanatory variables to try and explain the difference between those students finding their school enjoyable and the rest. The student personal and family background explains some of the variation. Very little of the variation in responses is explicable by school-level factors. Most of the differences between those who enjoy and those who do not enjoy school are related to individual experiences of education (see below).

Table 1 – Cumulative percentage of variation in responses to ‘I enjoy school’ explained by each stage of analysis

Individual student background variables	10
School-level variables	3
Individual experiences of education	33

Note: in this table, the figures show the percentage of variation in student responses that can be explained by each group of variables. The student reports of experiences at school explain 33% of the variation in responses, over and above 10% explained by student background, and 3% explained by institutional-level factors.

The equivalent result for whether students report lessons as interesting is even clearer (Table 2). Very little of the variation in responses about whether lessons are interesting is explicable by the student background, or the intake to schools or other school-level factors (despite the ‘favourable’ order in which these stages were processed). Again, it is the experience of individual students in schools that is key to our understanding of interest and enjoyment of education.

Table 2 – Cumulative percentage of variation in responses to ‘Most lessons are interesting’ explained by each stage of analysis

Individual student background variables	4
School-level variables	0
Individual experiences of education	38

Note: in this table, the figures show the percentage of variation in student responses that can be explained by each group of variables. The student reports of experiences at school explain 38% of the variation in responses, over and above 4% explained by student background.

Given that this national sample involved schools of all types, and students from very diverse backgrounds, the first important finding is therefore that reported enjoyment of school and finding lessons interesting are not particularly stratified by the standard sociological variables of class, ethnicity, and so on. There are some differences, of course. Just under 50% of girls reported enjoying schools compared to just over 40% of boys. But the remaining differences are smaller. For example, 41% of pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) reported finding lessons interesting, compared to just over 39% of pupils not eligible. FSM is a widely used indicator of family poverty. Similarly, 52% of pupils with the lowest level of attainment at the prior Key Stage 3 reported finding lessons interesting, compared to 54% of the pupils with the highest level of attainment.

This is very different to the social and economic stratification found when looking at other potential outcomes of school such as attainment itself. Nor is there any evidence of a systematic school or school type effect here. The levels of enjoyment reported by students do not differ substantially by setting, once the relatively small differences in individual background are taken into account. A single-sex girls school has the highest levels of reported enjoyment, for example, but this is to be expected because girls are more likely to report enjoying school (see above). Enjoyment in the independent (fee-paying) schools in the sample was slightly higher than the overall average, and slightly lower in the special projects attached to pupil referral units. But these differences s were not worthy of note once individual student differences were have been adjusted for. Some of the students in fee-paying schools did not like feeling ~~felt~~ under pressure to perform and justify their parents' investment, and some of the marginalised students found the relaxed and supportive atmosphere of the

special projects preferable to traditional school – they were allowed to go outside and smoke, for example. Some of the lower attaining students attended a local FE college for at least part of their week, and again found the atmosphere more relaxed (see below for examples). The ‘effect’ size of the type of school attended was not large enough to be retained in the logistic regression models (Tables 1 and 2). Removing school type as a potential explanatory variable made no difference at all to the amount of variation explained. If accepted, this finding has important and beneficial consequences for attempts to increase and widen enjoyment of education.

The experiences of students at school that *are* related to enjoyment are very similar to those related to finding lessons interesting (Tables 3 and 4). Restrictions on choice at age 14 caused by school pressure and timetable blocking constraints reportedly reduce the likelihood that students enjoy their school and lessons. On the other hand, enjoyment of school and interest in lessons is strongly enhanced by student sense of autonomy – including being allowed to work at their own pace, discuss issues with staff and other students, and being encouraged to make up their own minds about issues raised. These outcomes are also linked to good facilities and resources, in the form of specialist staff, suitable rooms for teaching, and small classes. Finally, they are also linked to variation in delivery, including practical work, visits and field trips, and contact with students on other programmes.

Table 3 – Individual background variables in model for enjoyed school

Enough chance to discuss	1.54
Contact with other students on other programmes	1.45
Suitable teaching rooms	1.41
Can work at my own pace	1.39
Encouraged to make up own mind	1.30
Choice <u>of course</u> restricted by school pressure	0.68

Note: in this table the figures are odds ratios. A student reporting being restricted in choice of course is only 0.68 times as likely as a student not so restricted to report enjoying school.

Table 4 – Individual response variables in model for most lessons are interesting

Enough practical work	1.67
Teachers for specialist subjects	1.52
Enough visits	1.52
Can work at my own pace	1.39
Encouraged to make up my own mind	1.33
Small classes	1.27
Enough chance to discuss	1.25
Choice <u>of course</u> restricted by timetable	0.81

Note: in this table the figures are odds ratios. A student reporting experiencing enough practical work is 1.67 times as likely as a student not reporting this also to report lessons as interesting.

It is important to recall for the rest of this paper that differences in student background and in school types have been accounted for, as far as possible, in this explanatory model before we look at individual experiences. We are, therefore, able to make quite general claims about these experiences as the likely determinants of enjoyment at school. We illustrate student experiences using examples from the interviews and focus groups, and the generalisability of these examples stems at least as much from the logistic regression model that they illustrate as from their relative frequency in interview transcripts. The implications are considered in the final section.

The determinants of enjoyment

The patterns of enjoyment and interest are quite clear in this model, and most strongly related to experiences at school. However, several issues relevant to enjoyment were each mentioned by only a few students. This could be partly because ~~the conditions which create~~ enjoyment ~~relate strongly to~~ is so much a matter of individual preference, and partly because enjoyment can refer to so many different aspects of life at school. What we have done for the analysis presented in this paper is to focus on factors that recur in different ways in different stories. Many students, across all settings, referred to friends they have made, and the social aspects of learning, such as support from friends and discussion groups. Some talked about fun activities in the classroom,

while others referred to a relaxed atmosphere of teaching and learning or an adult relationship with their teachers (being treated with respect and as emerging adults rather than as children). Students also referred to issues of autonomy in learning, such as being able to work at their own pace, having the chance to discuss things in class, being given the opportunity to work in small groups, receiving individual attention, and having a say in their learning. These accounts illustrate and match extremely well with the broader explanatory model presented so far.

Having friends

Having friends at school and the social aspects of school were frequently suggested by students as key to their enjoyment. Enjoyment through successful social relationships was prized by both students and parents as a valued end in its own right. But almost all made a connection between such social interaction and learning:

Having fun, being yourself and being with people you like...having fun but learning, you don't just come here to have fun you come here because you want something and if you want it you will get it.

I have enjoyed it as you make friends and have experiences which teach you things as well as achieving good grades.

Being with others who want to learn and make progress aids the enjoyment of lessons, as does a friendly relaxed atmosphere free from intimidation and threats of other students:

Everyone knows each other, you can have a good laugh with anyone and you feel more comfortable around people.

It's a relaxed atmosphere all the time.

Students found small classes less intimidating. They reported enjoying lessons where classes are small, where they can work in groups to discuss their ideas, and where they feel encouraged to make up their own mind. Some said they enjoyed school

because they were able to discuss things with other people doing the same subjects, or being with similar ability children, or with students who share the same desire to discover more:

I think it's mainly because everyone's here for the same reason, everyone wants to do...have...be successful in like and everyone wants to continue on their education and that's why we're all here.

I prefer to work in a group, because if you have one on one it's really, really nervous. But ~~ifs~~ you have a friend with you it's like you've someone else to talk to.

There are many examples of students believing that the social aspect of learning, such as being able to work in groups, to talk with each other and to support each other was both enjoyable in itself and supportive of learning. A selection of answers to a prompt in the focus groups - 'have you enjoyed your time at school?' - illustrates this:

Yes, definitely! I've met a lot of new people and always had help and encouragement when I needed it. I know I can come back anytime and have felt very at home here.

Yes I did because I learnt so much new stuff and have many more friends.

Yes. Because made lots of friends and just had a good time in lessons with teachers and students.

Yes! Just it's like a second home really. As you have a growing relationship with some teachers. And being with friends and achieving GCSEs. A lot of future life skills have been learned.

Relationships with teachers

As suggested in the previous set of comments, one factor that helps create a sense of shared enjoyment is a good relationship with teachers and the other adults in

education. The feeling of being in a relationship of trust and respect, a working partnership of younger and older adult, is part of this. One student had previously not been keen on school, but had noticed a change over time:

‘cos they all treat you like you’re adults, and that’s actually good, cos... like, young adults, and they tell us, like, if you don’t bother about your GCSEs you’re not gonna end up nowhere, so... that’s when I thought, just keep my head down, do my work.

One disengaged person in another school said:

I think it’s all really about trust, and freedom as well.

For some students it is very simple things like addressing their teachers by their first names that make them feel they were being treated as grown ups, and that can make the learning experience enjoyable:

Teachers are much, they respect you more, talk to you like, not like you’re a little kid, treat you with a bit of respect, give you a bit of leeway if you’re like that with them, if you do what they do, they’ll be alright with you. They won’t talk to like a little child or look down at you or anything, so that’s cushedy.

This was more frequent in the experience of students who learnt off-site either at work or a college for part of their week, and was sometimes contrasted unfavourably with treatment at school:

Interviewer: how do you feel about [off-site learning]?

Respondent: I enjoy it, it’s a more comfortable place than being around a school environment, more fun in lessons, teachers are nice, you don’t have to call them Mr. and Mrs, it is more first names

Interviewer: How does that make you feel, using first names?

Respondent: You don’t feel like a child, you feel like you are doing things right, because they don’t say you are doing things wrong...but it makes you feel more welcome.

Adults working with young people off-site have also noticed the difference and the change this can bring about:

We find that, it never ceases to amaze me, they are completely different creatures down at [project site]. I've heard, I think, one young lady, she came from [school] and apparently from all accounts, she was a bit of a horror, you know, and she's absolutely perfect at [project site]. She behaves herself. She does as she's asked. And when you ask her why, she says it's the way she's spoken to. She feels that sometimes teachers don't speak to her with the respect that she deserves. [\[Adult trainer\]](#)

We have a young man from [school]. Apparently he's autistic, apparently we've been told that he can't read and can't write. Within two sessions at [project site], he was reading to us off a fire extinguisher because he was doing his health and safety. So, you know, there are no barriers. I mean you see the referral forms and think "Goodness me, what have got coming here", you know. [\[Adult trainer\]](#)

Variation and imagination in lesson delivery

The main setting for interactions between young people and teacher is in school lessons, and reports of enjoyment in lessons and how it can be achieved dominate the accounts we were given. Overall, there was an appreciation of innovation and preparation in learning activities. Some students said they enjoyed lessons which involved physical activities like getting them to move around or acting out a scene. Others liked practical work, debates, dramatisations or just the unexpected. The key underlying message is that young people enjoy lessons where there is variation in delivery and activity:

Like in English one time, we were doing poetry and we had a poem, and we had to do freeze frames for it, like for the poem. And we got to dress up and then we had to do a freeze frame to represent the whole poem, which was good. So you understood how people were feeling, like they might have been feeling in that poem and how they might have stood and things.

We had to do this electrons thing and then the teacher got us all to stand round in a circle and we had to hold this rope, and we were the electrons and then we kind of moved around, so they only move in one way the electrons. If like one falls, then the other can like push the other one.

I had one teacher who would do, like, to show Women's Liberation he wore a bra and took it off, and... I just... that... I will never ever forget that. And to do Hippies we walked into the classroom and there were candles everywhere, he had his tie round his head, you know, and it was just so different and so funny that you won't ever forget it, so...

And sometimes they get us to do presentations, like us teaching the class so it sort of helps us to learn it as well... so it can be boring... sitting there with a teacher and we just switch off so she gets us to actively teach the other person so that get us to know the textbook as well.

A variety of approach and input is important both to learning and the satisfaction that comes with learning. That kind of satisfaction is seen by many students as very enjoyable and at least as important as the more overtly fun elements of lessons and the social interaction outside lessons:

Sometimes you watch, like a film or a documentary or a re-enacting of something that happened in life, so then you get to see the people that actually go through it, and then you get to see their expressions, rather than reading it, because sometimes if you read things, you don't get like the full effect, but then if you see something acting out then you really understand what it would be like.

A minority of students are more likely to report enjoying lessons that they see as directly relevant to their future life or career. These young people were often learning off-site in a project, college or work environment, which seem to provide this realism more readily than schools:

I'd rather work and learn something I need rather than learn Shakespeare which I'm not going to need for a brick-laying course. Thou shalt not lay thy brick there, it doesn't make sense.

Doing well in a subject to enhance future employment and career prospects is also seen as crucial for some, even where the subject is taught at school:

Yeah, career wise, you have got to enjoy your career haven't you, you can't do a career you absolutely hate. So yeah, if you do the right course you do the right career, you have really got to enjoy it.

Support for learning

It is a problem to be struggling at school, and finding no assistance is available. Happily, many young people reported additional support, whether this was one-to-one at the end of the lessons or more formal or permanent arrangements. They appreciate this help, and it allows them to enjoy school more. Some students spoke of the approachability of the teaching staff that helped to make school life pleasant:

Yeah, all that I have to do is just go and speak to my teachers and say I'm struggling with this and the teacher will say come to me at a certain time and we'll see what we can do about it.

I feel I am fully supported at school and with everything I do.

[...] we were given the board, and then after, the teacher generally, they do come round to make sure that you're alright. Every lesson that I have the teacher makes sure that we're alright.

We can always go and talk to our teachers after a lesson, or at lunchtime. Especially our maths teacher - she gives up her lunchtimes and has done for weeks to help us with coursework, she sets up extra classes. She even comes to our house and does private tutoring.

If you ask a teacher to explain something you don't understand... I've had half an hour, just a one-to-one, before, them teaching me something I don't understand, or something I've missed. If you put in less, then you won't get the respect of the teacher, so you end up getting less. You get back what you put in.

When a student with dyslexia, among other challenges, was asked why he liked certain subjects, he explained that it was because he had extra help and support for those subjects:

'Cos I get support in them, and I get help with my work sometimes. A person what comes and sits next to me and tells me what to write and helps me read it.

The determinants of disengagement

Of course, a few of these students were in privileged or supposedly advantaged situations such as being at a fee-paying or selective school. Some may have been lucky to have such imaginative and supportive teachers, or smaller classes in rural areas, or the additional funding that came with being in a particular kind of school like an Academy, or the chance to learn off-site. But for the one third to half of all students who found school both enjoyable and interesting these were common themes, wherever they studied. What about the remaining students? In a sense, the general complaints of this majority are the reverse of the stories above. The findings are consistent. The difference lies simply in the actual experiences of students.

Disruptive behaviour of other students

For example, while other students are a welcome source of friendship and support for many, the behaviour of other students was also described as a major factor hindering enjoyment. The abusive behaviour of a minority of young people to their peers, in the form of bullying, violence, theft, and social isolation, is widely known and well documented (Gorard and Smith 2010). It is perhaps the biggest single threat to genuinely inclusive and comprehensive schooling. In this study though, the concerns

expressed were more about the frustration and wasted time of lessons disrupted by other students, and the enormous challenges facing staff trying to deal with it.

Don't think it's anything to do with, like, lesson planning, [...] it is just generally the class distraction. If they were willing to listen then I think we would learn. It's just...teachers allow some students to get away with murder.

But there's some teachers that can't control the classes. So, like, all the students will be talking, and doing their own stuff. So that's when we don't learn as much, and the lesson's just wasted.

Lack of rapport with teachers

Poor student-teacher relationships can be a cause of stress for students, while lack of teacher respect for students is widely cited as a cause, or attempted justification, for bad behaviour. One student ~~from a community school~~ explained why they did not enjoy it:

Some teachers don't respect you and wonder why you cause so much trouble. Some teachers in the school respect certain pupils and don't respect some others, and they wonder why kids get so rude to them and start swearing and that's when we get into trouble. The teachers say we want respect from you but they don't normally show it to us. They're the teacher they're always right, we're the kid and we don't know what we are going on about.

There were even accounts of teachers acting in a manner most likely to depress ambition and prevent the satisfaction that stems from co-operative learning:

Every lesson 'you are all gonna fail' and then he might set you an assignment to write and he will say 'hand my at the end of' and then you are handing in your work 'so let's see what is worth laughing on this paper'. You do not want to hear that you have done your best you expect a teacher to behave like a teacher and not criticize you and tell you that 'you are gonna fail'.

When I actually went for an interview at [agricultural college] and got my place... I showed my [pastoral teacher] and... she actually turned round and said that it's a load of rubbish, there's no point doing it, 'cos I ain't going to get nowhere in life 'cos I never come to school... I might as well just drop all my dreams and just be a bum, basically, live off Social. Which really put me down.

Sometimes the complaints were simply about poor basic teaching technique. Some students expressed frustration at not being able to follow in class. A common complaint was about audibility – one of the most basic elements of classroom craft:

In (subject) teacher can't speak.

I am failing my (subject) because my teacher does not speak up and only talks to the front row.

A linked complaint was lack of real engagement, such as eye contact, and continuing with a narrative almost like a recording, and so missing the point that students cannot engage and copy notes at the same time, or turning question and answer sessions into a farce:

Sometimes if you're copying and the teacher is talking at the same time you can't listen to them, so you don't know what they are saying.

Teachers often go too fast, like you're saying; you don't end up knowing what's going on because you're trying to take notes like as fast as you can, and so you are not listening, so then your notes aren't completely there, so ...

They might say 'copy it down, research later', like revise it later, but you won't because you can't go through it again because you haven't been given the information in the first place because all you've done is copy it down, and you need a teacher to help you – explain it to you, and discuss it with you.

He doesn't say can you answer this question most of the time, because he just shouts.

Cos, as soon as the teachers ask a question he doesn't like give anyone else a chance to think about it, he just shoot off. Basically all of you just sit there, you're still thinking about the question and (expletive) gives the answers, so you kinda get the thing that you're not doing anything in the class, you're just sitting there and just going there to listen to someone else talk.

Unimaginative lesson delivery

In fact this last complaint, the reverse of the enjoyable varied and imaginative lesson, was easily the most common. The experiences which were widely perceived to undermine enjoyment were passive pedagogy, such as listening to a teacher for lengthy periods, copying, note taking, and having to sit still for a prolonged period. The lack of enjoyment in passive learning was widely made by students. Many students did not like the classic style of lesson, as it might appear in a caricature or comedy film:

He just stands at the blackboard, or the whiteboard...and just writing on the board...

It is surprising that lessons for year 11 students still consist of so much 'chalk and talk'. Teaching was seen by very many as unsatisfactory. Perceptions included that students were left without help:

[The teacher will] give you a sheet and you'll just go through each question and they might not even, unless you express a want to be told how to do it, they might not even, you know, support you in any way.

and asked to engage in meaningless activities:

We're given a sheet and we're just spoken to and we write down notes and then the sheet is, at the end of the hour, two hour lesson, is lost and never seen again. We don't really learn that way.

~~and~~or alienated by repetition and boredom:

I don't think there's many teachers in this school that understand that like kids learn in different ways

There is never really a surprise when you go into a lesson.

Like, sometimes, teachers think it's a good idea for you to sit silently in class, and to only listen to them... but I think it's good for to be able to talk between yourselves and... not, like, obviously about the subject. But to be able to sit there in silence for an hour lesson just looking at a whiteboard, it does give you a headache.

It is noteworthy that none of thousands of teachers taking part in our survey mentioned prioritising enjoyment for students as an objective when planning their teaching, even though there was a prompt for them to do this in the staff survey. Very few alluded to it in the interviews. This is a shame because while enjoyment is presumably neither necessary nor sufficient for learning to take place, student reports of enjoyment are a kind of barometer of when things are going well in a lesson, and when they are most definitely not.

Conclusions

We present the concluding section of this paper in two parts. First, we rehearse some of the caveats about our approach, and list some of the ways in which we have attempted to test whether our conclusions are warranted (Gorard 2002). Then we suggest some of the practical implications of the work, if accepted.

How much reliance should we place on these results?

It is important to recall that a lot of potentially important things remain unmeasured in our survey of students, and in the school-level characteristics derived from the official schools census data. In addition, we cannot claim that the samples are perfectly

representative, and there is inevitably some non-response, both at school and student level. The focus groups were largely selected for us by the schools themselves. More importantly, in our analysis we are associating some parts of the reports of students with other parts of the same reports. There is no definitive test of a causal model here, and even a danger of elements of tautology in some of the associations reported. We have no prior evidence of the enjoyment and interest of students, of the kind that could be used to create a baseline or assess the progress made over a period of time at school. Regression techniques are anyway infamous for dredging datasets and finding spurious patterns *post hoc* (Gorard 2006). These are the kinds of problems that would occur in any real-life research project of this scale and ambition. Being aware of them, and making readers aware of them, is part of our defence to being misled by them.

Where there is overlap with prior projects between the questions asked and the methods used, our findings here replicate our earlier findings from our international survey of 6,000 students in Belgium, France, Italy, Spain and Wales (EGREES 2005), a 2,000 case pilot in Belgium, the Czech Republic, England, France, Italy (EGREES 2008), and a survey of 13,000 students in the same five countries plus Japan (Gorard and Smith 2010). So we now have a body of evidence on some of these issues that covers over 20,000 students in seven countries worldwide. In addition, our survey results (self-reports of student attainment, for example) are in agreement with official and other data sources where a comparison is possible. The student comments, whether given in conversation, focus groups, or written on the questionnaire, agree with and help us understand the survey results. Our prolonged presence in each research setting during delivery of the instruments, and the wonderful conversations that ensued, have assured us that the vast majority of students take the chance to express their views very seriously indeed.

Our efforts to avoid being misled by regression include using only robust and sizeable results, and trying a range of alternative models solely for the purpose of testing the volatility of the solutions. There are no issues of significance (and so vanishing breakthroughs) here. We focus only on effect sizes (of 33% or more of outstanding variance explained), and odds outside the range 0.8 and 1.2 that are consistent in scale and direction across different outcomes or groups of students. We entered potential explanatory variables in a theoretically coherent order to prevent unwanted proxies

from dominating the analyses, but we also ran the models in reverse order and found that the substantive findings did not change. We compared each model to a precise equivalent derived from the same dataset and predictors, but with the outcome variable replaced by a random number with the same distribution over two categories (such as enjoying school or not). These random models barely improved from the baseline figures, and this assured us that our published results are not spurious patterns.

The scale of relationship between the predictors such as student background, school mix or student experience of justice, and the two outcome variables here is substantial, over a reasonably large sample. The results are credible. Another way of imagining these findings is to compare them with the long-standing tradition of work on academic school effectiveness. School effectiveness, as a field, has the same problems as the work described here. It is not a causal test, does not have complete information, has to deal with omitted variables and missing cases, and so on. But our models are based on biography (and so the time sequence necessary for causation), rather than the nesting hierarchies or levels used in school effectiveness which perforce leave aside characteristics that do not nest, such as sex. Although our measures of intrinsically hard to measure ideas in education, will be imprecise, they do not suffer from the problem of propagation of errors that school effectiveness calculations do (Gorard 2010a). In these respects, our findings are more powerful than the school effects purportedly found in school effectiveness work. Thus, it is worth thinking about the consequences of the findings. ~~are genuinely worth thinking about the consequences of.~~

Government policy in education worldwide is routinely based on evidence from erroneous analyses, much smaller studies, or studies that make no attempt to provide a warrant for their conclusions. See, for example, the high impact study for England discussed in Gorard (2008), in which major national policy affecting the social mobility of 60 million people is being based on around nine out of 17,000 adults appearing in an unexpected cell for a cross-tabulation, and on an error caused by using the wrong year in an international comparison. Billions of pounds are spent, at huge opportunity cost, on policies and practices that have no success, and no hope of success (such as the teacher effectiveness programme envisaged by Barber and

Moursched 2007). Our work here is, we believe, recognisably different from these, and ready to be engineered into more useable forms for policy and practice.

What are the implications of this study?

The results of this study are good news for the school system of England, and probably elsewhere, for at least two reasons. First, the patterning and stratification of school opportunities and outcomes that hinder traditional school improvement work do not appear very strongly here. When considering enjoyment of school and interest in lessons, there is little difference according to student family background (such as eligibility for free school meals). Perhaps most importantly, reported prior attainment at Key Stage 3 seems completely unrelated to enjoyment at KS4, suggesting that interest in lessons is not the disproportionate preserve of high attainers. Similarly unrelated is the kind of school attended, its intake and geographical location, its academic standing, its curriculum offer, and the staff priorities as reported by teachers. In traditional parlance we could say that there is no school effect on enjoyment as an outcome, since the variance explained by school-level measures is almost zero. This is a quite remarkable finding. It means that any attempt to enhance enjoyment for all does not need to face those structural and socio-economic barriers that school improvers usually face. It would also be relatively cheap, since it does not of itself require new buildings, extra teachers, or different kinds of schools.

There may be several reasons for this surprising finding. Previous studies have shown that there is no positive relationship between relative success in school or intention to continue in education, and enjoyment. In fact, sometimes the reverse pattern holds. In international studies, countries with the highest levels of attainment, such as Finland or Korea, can have students with the least-weakest declared interest in schooling (Caygill 2008). In England, interest in subjects like maths and science can be inversely related to patterns of uptake of those subjects later on (Gorard and See 2009). Students can be ‘objectively’ disadvantaged, in terms of challenges to their learning or a deprived economic background, and still enjoy learning. Indeed, providing a shelter from the impact of disadvantage is one of the main reasons for having and supporting a state-funded education system (Gorard 2010b).

Second, there are welcome and widespread accounts of enjoyment here, whether couched as fun at school, pleasure in learning, satisfaction in attainment, or good relationships between students and students, and students and teachers. To some extent the aspects of good practice described by students may be the determinants of enjoyment, and to that extent practitioners can increase and widen student appreciation of learning by adopting them more generally. To some extent, though, these aspects may simply be a reflection of school enjoyment itself. To this extent the general findings are still useful, providing practitioners with a kind of barometer of enjoyment. Thus, they can at least look out for and avoid the less desirable classroom situations described in the second half of the paper.

The clear majority of patterning in outcomes that we find in the models and accounts presented in this paper relates to individual student experiences of education. Students enjoy variety of delivery in lessons, not because of the weakly-founded but fashionable notion that students may differ in some kind of preferred learning style but because lessons should be more than information delivery. They can be exciting and inspiring. They can be fun. Practical work, role-playing, visits, and especially real discussions are desired by most students, but these cannot be provided in a uniform and dull way. It is perhaps the enthusiasm behind the existing variety, as much as any formula, that is attractive.

Students as well as teachers demand respect, and appreciate autonomy in their approach to learning. The students are the ones who will learn (or not) and so control of this learning, assisted by teachers, is fundamental to them. Having enough chances for discussion, learning in small groups, and variation in lesson delivery (as above) are positively related to the experience at school. Students find lessons interesting, enjoy education more generally, and report having enough of a say in their own education, when the classes are small, they can discuss their ideas in class, the teachers are appropriately specialist, and there is variation in delivery and activity. The same kinds of outcomes are also positively associated with students reporting contact with students on other courses or programmes (which might refer to social or pastoral activities, learning off-site, or to vertical organisations such as houses and competitions, or simply a small institution).

All of this may sound obvious and simple but as other commentators have observed, it can be the students who report the most serious problems at school who have the poorest relationships with teachers anyway (Gorard 2007, Boulton et al. 2009). More generally, not all teachers are routinely open to suggestions for improvement that come from their students (Davie and Galloway 1996), and school organisation is sometimes not conducive to creating a supportive community for students (Osterman 2000). Partly this is based on a misunderstanding or misapplication of equity in schools (Gorard and Smith 2010). The criteria for judging fair and appropriate behaviour for both students and teachers in any context are complex (Stevens 2009).

‘Equity’ is difficult to define, but it perhaps represents that sense of fairness which underlies decisions about whether any specific principle of justice, such as equal treatment or equal opportunity, applies in any given context. Put simply, it is an internal template forming part of how we know something is fair. There is usually considerable agreement about what is fair and what is unfair, and problems arise largely when one principle is used inadvertently in the wrong kind of context. An example of equity in classroom interactions is represented by teachers’ respect for all students’ opinions, even when they might disagree with one or more of them. Encouraging the ideas, arguments and evidence advanced by students encourages learning as much as disagreement does. Respect for the individual despite a difference of opinion, and even where the student ideas are demonstrably incorrect or facile to the more sophisticated teacher, may encourage a sense of personal autonomy and self-worth in the young person. It, therefore, influences the student’s self-perceived position in social interactions, particularly *vis a vis* figures of authority. There is widespread agreement among all young people that students should be treated with respect by teachers, and their opinions should be valued. Denying that respect, where it occurs, is an error of context by teachers because respect is a threshold or universal principle. On the other hand, rewarding effort or good work, punishing poor behaviour, and even reprimanding students for the abuse of others, are all examples of contexts where differentiation is possible and expected. Denying respect differentially is as bad a mistake as reprimanding universally would be, but it ~~is a lot more common~~ appears much more frequently in the accounts reported here for some reason.

The importance of this is that where schools are seen by students as co-operative ventures, enjoyment is more widespread (Battistich and Hom 1997). Enhancing enjoyment of school through consideration of better and more consistent student: teacher relations may have an impact on learning, behaviour and attendance (see Sakiz and Woolfolk-Hoy 2009 for work on the enjoyment of mathematics in the USA, for example). But our purpose here is not to suggest that enjoyment of and interest in school are important primarily because they will help yield higher attainment. This lack of concern for enjoyment as an outcome *sui generis* is quite widespread in policy documents, and in the relevant research literature (e.g. Dugdale 2009). Both the 14-19 Reforms in England and the new Foundation Phase in Wales (see above) have suggested that a key reason to enhance enjoyment is so that attainment (and perhaps participation) is increased. Enjoyment is apparently not enough for its own sake. Yet, enjoyment of life in school is clearly a good thing, even if it leads to no greater attainment. It would probably also have an impact on young peoples' lives outside and beyond school (Pugh and Bergin 2005), and on their developing sense of what is appropriate and normal in wider society (Gorard and Smith 2008). It will almost certainly help produce generations of adults less wary of formal education and training in their future lives (Gorard and Rees 2002, Selwyn et al. 2006).

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